

How can someone steal your identity?

Identity theft occurs when someone uses your personal information such as your name, social security number, or other identifying information, without your permission, to commit fraud or other crimes.

Identity theft is a serious crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years - and their hard-earned money - cleaning up the mess thieves have made of their good name and credit record. In the meantime, victims may lose job opportunities, have loans refused, or even get arrested for crimes they didn't commit.

Generally, identity thieves use someone's personal data to steal his or her financial accounts and run up charges on the victim's existing credit cards, but the IRS has identified other potential areas where this type of fraud may occur as they relate directly to your tax records.

Undocumented workers or other individuals may use your social security number to get a job. That person's employer would report W-2 wages earned using your information to the IRS so it might appear that you did not report all of your income on your return.

An identity thief may file a tax return using your social security number to receive a refund or stimulus payment.

If the thief already filed a return using your social security number, the IRS will believe that you already filed and received your refund, and the return you just submitted is a second copy or duplicate.

If you do receive a notice from the IRS that leads you to believe someone may have used your social security number fraudulently, please notify the IRS immediately by responding to the name and number printed on the notice or letter.

Be alert to possible identity theft if the notice or letter states that:

-- more than one tax return for you was filed, or -- IRS records indicate you received wages from an employer unknown to you.

-- if you receive a notice, contact the IRS either by phone or in writing as directed in that notice. IRS tax examiners will work with you and other agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, to help resolve the problem.

The IRS does not initiate taxpayer communications through e-mail.

The IRS does not request detailed personal information through e-mail:

The IRS does not send e-mails requesting your PIN numbers, passwords or similar access information for credit cards, banks or other financial accounts.

If you receive an e-mail from someone claiming to be the IRS or directing you to an IRS site:

- do not reply.
- do not open any attachments. Attachments may contain malicious code that will infect your computer.
- do not click on any links.

Phishing is the act of sending an e-mail to a user falsely claiming to be an established, legitimate enterprise in an attempt to scam the user into surrendering private information that will be used for identity theft.

If you receive an e-mail or find a website you think is pretending to be the IRS:

- forward the e-mail or website URL to the IRS at phishing@irs.gov.
- you can forward the message as received or provide the internet header in the e-mail. The internet header has additional information to help the IRS locate the sender.
- after you forward the e-mail or header information to the IRS, delete the message.

Minimizing Identity Theft:

Though you can't prevent identity theft entirely, you can minimize your risk. Protect your social security number.

- Don't carry your social security number (SSN); leave it in a secure place.
- Only give your SSN when absolutely necessary.
- Your employer and financial institution may need your SSN for wage and tax reporting purposes. Don't give a business your SSN just because they ask for it. Find out why before giving it out.
- Ask why your SSN is needed and if other types of identifiers can be used.

For more information on identity theft and your tax records, please visit www.irs.gov, and use the words "Identity Theft" in the search block.